



# The Case for Multiparty Presidentialism in the US

WHY THE HOUSE SHOULD ADOPT PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

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# Introduction

The intense partisan polarization and hatreds in the U.S., alongside growing willingness of many politicians and voters to support authoritarian practices, have generated deep concern about our democracy. In this paper, we argue that multipartism would likely attenuate these serious challenges to our democracy, and that a system of proportional representation (PR)<sup>1</sup> for the House of Representatives would likely generate moderate multipartism, with several beneficial effects for U.S. democracy. We argue that presidentialism and PR for the U.S. House would be an effective combination for American democracy. We believe this for three reasons.

First, proportional representation has some clear advantages over first-past-the-post voting. Proportional representation would completely eliminate or radically reduce opportunities for gerrymandering, which has had increasingly pernicious effects on US democracy. With extensive gerrymandering, politicians choose their voters rather than vice versa. Because candidates for the House in all but states with few representatives would compete against many more potentially electable competitors, and because it would end or greatly curtail gerrymandering, PR would also sharply reduce the very large number of safe seats—the vast majority of the House. In safe districts, politicians' main electoral concern is being primaried, a situation that often creates incentives to take extremist positions that have fueled polarization. In addition, in a PR system, all votes can make a

difference in how many candidates, and which candidates, get elected from different parties. This, too, would be a profound and salutary change from the current situation in which most voters know that their vote for the House will not affect outcomes.

These are the certain virtues that PR would bring. In addition, it is very likely that PR, by fostering the electoral viability of a small number of additional parties, eliminating gerrymandering, and greatly reducing safe seats, would attenuate hyperpartisan polarization and open up spaces for compromise in our political system.

Proportional representation would increase fairness and legitimacy by scrambling these artificial district boundaries, removing the possibilities for gerrymandering, and giving all voters a chance to influence results.

Second, looking beyond our borders, we are encouraged by the strong performance of presidentialism and multipartism in several democracies around the world over the last three decades. Despite concerns about their performance in the early 1990s (following a somewhat difficult period in the 1970s and 1980s), several multiparty presidential democracies have proven resilient, with presidents and legislatures often working well together, and party systems and institutions flexibly responding to ongoing challenges. When presidents and legislatures don't work well

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1 briefly explains how PR systems work.

together in multiparty presidential democracies, it usually has more to do with the nature of the problems the democracies face and the actors per se, rather than the institutional combination.

Today, dozens of countries combine presidentialism and proportionally elected multiparty lower chambers. Many are thriving democracies. Globally, the United States is the outlier—a rare presidential democracy with a two-party system.

Third, we see a danger in the continued status quo. The hyperpartisan polarization that has emerged in the U.S. two-party system poses a threat to our democracy—a threat that the winner-take-all presidency is making worse. When presidents enjoy congressional majorities, Congress amplifies the worst zero-sum tendencies of presidential government. Conversely, under divided government, presidents don't get much accomplished in this era of intense polarization. The current electoral rules often punish compromise-oriented moderates, making the system unlikely to self-correct without a rules change. We need a rules change that would allow moderates to gain more representation, even if they are not a majority within any single district or state. Proportional representation is the most effective way to accomplish this goal.

The design of the American system of government, and presidential democracy more broadly, is one of checks and balances. Executives and legislatures serve different functions. Executives serve as singular leaders, with a bias towards efficiency and action. Legislatures are aggregators of societal diversity, and forums for

negotiation, compromise, and deliberation. In an ideal world, the two balance each other out. A legislature should stand as a check and a balance against executive aggrandizement. A president's singular capacity as the focal point of government can press the legislature to take tough votes when inaction would be easier.

To accomplish this balance, presidents and legislators must operate separately, and be elected separately. From the 1960s through the 1990s, many U.S. voters considered House, Senate and presidential candidates separately, based on their own merits, often splitting their tickets. Arguably, this division was a key to the relative and unique success of American presidential democracy at a time when many scholars considered presidential democracy broadly problematic.

As American politics has nationalized and polarized over the last three decades, however, split-ticket voting has collapsed. Voters no longer view congressional and presidential candidates separately.<sup>2</sup> They consider these offices together, largely as a referendum on the presidency. Voters attempt to choose a unified government, though the American political system frequently frustrates this ambition by a design intended to make unified partisan majorities improbable. In dispersing power across institutions and relying on the diversity of an "expanded republic," the Framers had hoped to guard against tyranny that might emerge from a single majority faction gaining dominance everywhere. Madison's great fear was that the country would divide into two great factions, and civil war would result. In this sense, he anticipated the Civil War, and more

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Sievert and Seth C. McKee, "Nationalization in U.S. Senate and Gubernatorial Elections," *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (2019): 1055–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18792694>; Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

generally, the “losers’ consent” problem inherent in majoritarian electoral systems, in which losers view losses more sharply and are less likely to see the winning party as legitimate.<sup>3</sup>

For much of the 20th century, the separated nature of American governing institutions generated national stability by balancing overlapping factionalism within the party coalitions, though stability often meant inaction on pressing issues, particularly civil rights. However, in the 21st century, as American elections have nationalized, the institutional barriers to unified party rule have weakened—but they still exist.

Today, American government is constrained by a mismatch between governing rules and electoral rules, hobbled by an inconsistency among governing institutions designed to restrain simple majorities. An increasingly majoritarian partisan style of campaigning that seeks one-party dominance has likewise put the American system of governance under threat. When campaigns dismiss the other party as a threat to the nation, the compromise necessary for governing becomes difficult to find. Gridlock and brinkmanship follow. Distrust builds distrust, leading to overpromising—and more

disappointment. It is a cycle that contributes to growing radicalism.

One possible solution is to weaken the majoritarian impulses of the American party system by implementing proportional representation for the House of Representatives. This does not deal directly with the majoritarian aspects of presidential elections. Instead, it aims towards more balance, with different offices elected to serve different purposes and respond to different constituencies.

Whatever the pros and cons of presidential versus parliamentary systems, the United States is not likely to become a parliamentary system anytime soon. For better or worse, America is a presidential system. The relevant question is how to make America the best-performing presidential system possible, given the options.

In this paper, we examine how a combination of presidentialism and PR for the House of Representatives (or state or local elections) would work. Fortunately, we have a wealth of observations on which to draw, since this is how it works in most other presidential democracies in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Loser’s consent refers to the idea that those who lose elections must acknowledge the right of the winners to govern. Christopher J. Anderson, André Blais, Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan, and Ola Listhaug, *Losers’ Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

# Presidentialism, Polarized Bipartism, and Democracy: A Dysfunctional Combination

For much of the 20th century, the combination of presidentialism and single-member House districts with first-past-the-post elections in most states worked relatively well for large swaths of Americans. U.S. democracy had blemishes, especially the deep infringement on citizen rights for most Black people and the subnational authoritarian regimes in the South until 1965.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, for several decades until 2017, the U.S. had a high liberal-democracy score according to the Varieties of Democracy project and other major measures of democracy. And for hundreds of millions of people around the world, the U.S. served as a beacon of democracy.

In recent years, however, many scholars, politicians, journalists and voters have become increasingly concerned about the dysfunctionality and polarization in American politics. Something utterly unimaginable even 10 years ago—a democratic breakdown or deep erosion—has become the subject of a burgeoning literature.<sup>5</sup> Affective polarization (personal animus toward partisans of the opposite side) has increased greatly, and the two parties and their voters often

seem implacably hostile. As polarization has increased, political violence has spread beyond its traditional race-based targets.<sup>6</sup>

Democracies need to be agile enough to produce public policies that satisfy a wide range of citizen demands and needs, while at the same time providing checks on executive power to prevent executive aggrandizement. During the decades when V-Dem first scored the U.S. as having a robust liberal democracy (beginning in the 1970s), the two-party system helped accomplish these two outcomes—again, highly imperfectly, but well enough to balance a capacity for presidential leadership to pursue public policy with limits on presidential power. The old two-party system from the 1930s until the 1980s was based on relatively moderate parties at the national level, with a modest ideological gap based on median or mean ideological positions. Presidents could win support from the other party for some important policy initiatives.

This has changed. As American politics has nationalized and polarized, Republican members

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4 Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-1972* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

5 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid, eds., *When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Kurt Weyland, "Populism's Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the United States," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 2 (2020): 389–406, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719003955.022>; Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 234–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>.

6 Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

of Congress overwhelmingly support Republican presidents and oppose Democratic presidents on most issues. Democrats face the same issue in reverse. Partisans in Congress have little opportunity to distinguish themselves from presidents of the same party, so they have strong reasons to ensure their party's presidents are as popular as possible. Likewise, partisans in Congress with an opposition president in the White House have every incentive to undermine that president's popularity. And because fewer and fewer congressional districts and states select one party for president and a different party for Congress, fewer members of Congress face the kinds of cross-pressures that would encourage them to be dealmakers.

Thus, unified government and divided government in the U.S. now lead to two very different conditions, neither of which results in healthy executive-legislative bargaining. Because presidents have a majority in the legislature under unified government, they often pass their programs. However, because most partisan lawmakers consistently support the president, there is little meaningful separation of powers. This can be easily abused. Parties may try to maximize their limited unified government timeline to pass maximalist policies, particularly those designed to advantage their party in the next election. The most egregious examples have occurred at the state level, mostly in Republican-controlled states such as Wisconsin and North Carolina.

Under divided government, presidents have very little legislative success on major issues, as the opposition party uses its legislative powers to stop the president's program from passing, and

uses its oversight powers to investigate potential wrongdoing in the administration. This condition leads to legislative gridlock on important issues. In turn, gridlock encourages presidents to push the limits of executive powers, knowing there is no point in trying to seek legislative approval for major policy initiatives. However, this is an unstable way to make policy; it is subject to easy reversal by future administrations or by courts. Moreover, expansion of presidential powers has tended to be a one-way ratchet, and it could easily be abused, especially if the president's party controls both chambers of Congress.

Over time, this leads presidents to react more strongly to previous administrations in reversing policies, which becomes destabilizing for economic investments and foreign policy, since the administrative state has the most delegated authority over economic regulation and international affairs. The moderating features of the old party system have faded, and we see no possibility of resurrecting them.

The United States now experiences many of Juan Linz's warned-about "perils of presidentialism." Gridlock, immobilism and the problem of "dual legitimacy" (presidents and legislatures claiming competing mandates) are present under divided government,<sup>7</sup> and are weakening U.S. democracy. Conversely, when the same party controls the White House and Congress in this era of intense polarization, congressional checks on the president are too weak.

How did the United States go from the exemplar of stable presidentialism to an increasingly flawed democracy? The answer lies in the very reasons that scholars once saw American presidentialism

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<sup>7</sup> By divided government, we mean a situation in which the opposition party controls either the Senate or the House, or both.

as a success: the party system. When the two-party system operated as two overlapping and largely nonideological coalitions, there was plenty of opportunity for presidents to compromise with legislators across party lines. American democracy had divided government from 1969 to 1976, and again from 1981 through 1992. These were productive years for cross-partisan problem-solving in America.

Arguably, American democracy worked something like a multiparty democracy in those years, with shifting coalitions. Arguably, we had something akin to a four-party system, with liberal-to-moderate Republicans and moderate-to-conservative Democrats holding the balance on every issue, and liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans tugging in different directions.

In the past, it was common for presidents to include opposing partisans in their cabinet to show cross-partisan support. For example, in 1940, FDR selected Republican Henry Stimson as secretary of war and Frank Knox as Navy secretary. It was also common for presidents to build relationships with congressional leaders of opposing parties; now, relationships are tense and chilly, and the share of cross-partisan appointments has dwindled over time. Even in the recent past, Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush included one member of the other party in their cabinets.

In the mid-20th century, presidents operated somewhat independently from their parties.

Indeed, in James MacGregor Burns' 1963 telling ("The Deadlock of Democracy: Four-Party Politics in America"), Democrats and Republicans each had a congressional party and a presidential party, often at odds with each other. The presidential parties were broadly national. The congressional parties were dominated by political minorities, as the consequence of a seniority system that privileged members from the safest (most Democratic or most Republican) districts.

Burns' book lamented the immobilism and parochialism within that system. The 1950 APSA Report on Political Parties was equally blistering. In retrospect, it is amazing that this previous system worked at all—but at the time, the federal government had fewer powers

and responsibilities. The system produced centripetal "moderation," though the moderate consensus depended on granting Southern states considerable autonomy.

Because presidents were quite independent from their congressional

parties, presidents could operate as moderating national figures, often at war with the more extreme wings of their own parties. Today, that has changed: "The presidency as an institution ... is no longer restraining presidents from staking extreme political positions."<sup>8</sup>

Presidents can act as moderating forces only when political divides are moderate and bridgeable, and when moderate parties exist in the legislature to act as focal points for legislative bargaining. Thus,

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<sup>8</sup> Barry Edwards, "Does the Presidency Moderate the President?", *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2017): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12344.r>, p. 17–18).

Linz's warning about presidentialism peril being especially difficult in countries with deep political cleavages rings true.

As American politics has polarized into deep partisan divisions, presidents, like everyone else, have been forced to pick sides. The challenge for the United States is one that many democracies have struggled to manage: pernicious polarization, in which partisan cleavages split society into two warring camps that see each other not as fellow citizens, but as enemies to be permanently defeated. Under such conditions, democracies often fail.

The way out of such pernicious polarization is through partisan realignment that alters the binary zero-sum nature of conflict. Often, institutional reform is necessary to break this dynamic.<sup>9</sup> This is why we are considering proportional multiparty democracy as an intervention: to facilitate realignment and allow a new political center to emerge. As long as a sizable political center exists, most presidents tend to gravitate towards such a center, because that is where majorities are made.

The combination of sharp partisan polarization in a two-party system and presidentialism easily generates a zero-sum political conflict. Presidential elections are always highly important because the president sets the agenda. If the country is split into two mutually hostile partisan teams with no overlap, elections become even more high stakes. Under such circumstances, elections are prone to demonizing us-versus-them strategies that leave few swing voters, and depend more on mobilization (or demobilization) than persuasion.

By contrast, when the party system is overlapping and multidimensional, presidential elections offer possibilities for coalition recombinations and generally pull towards the political middle to win a majority—particularly if the president herself is a moderate. When two sides are not split into hostile camps that view compromise as capitulation, convergence on the political middle becomes the dominant strategy, and persuasion becomes a key campaign tactic.

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<sup>9</sup> Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Overcoming Polarization." *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 1 (2021): 6–21. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0012>.

# The Case for PR for the United States House of Representatives<sup>10</sup>

Would a multiparty Congress provide more effective checks and balances, and a more functional system of governance? Under the contemporary conditions of high polarization and high nationalization of politics, we believe it would. Over time, PR would likely foster limited multipartism in the House of Representatives. It is impossible to know what that would look like, but we could imagine, for example, a party of MAGA Republicans; a party of traditional conservatives; a (probably smaller) party of centrists; a large party of moderate Democrats; and a party of progressive Democrats. Though we cannot forecast the exact balance of support for such parties, we can say with confidence that it will foster a more dynamic and flexible party system. It will likely facilitate a new center-oriented party that could form the fulcrum for a political realignment.

Compared to the current system of rigid bipolarity with limited capacity for compromise between the two parties, and limited options for moderates within the parties (particularly the Republican Party), such a system would offer advantages for U.S. democracy. Most importantly, it would create more potential for compromise, and hence would likely have a beneficial effect on the country's high level of polarization. In addition, comparative evidence suggests that presidential democracy is most likely to fail

when the president's party has a majority in both chambers of the national Congress.<sup>11</sup> A moderate multiparty system would likely induce most presidents to govern more toward the center so as to be able to pass legislation.

Let us imagine a multiparty Congress in which no single party has a majority. In many ways, we don't have to imagine it so much as look to the past, when the U.S. had something more like a multiparty system within the two-party system, with liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats alongside conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats, and genuine factions that represented distinct organizational centers of power that aligned with Democrats on some issues and Republicans on others.

Under such conditions, presidents behaved very much as they do in multiparty systems. They often built coalitions on issue-by-issue bases, and used their own popularity and the power of agenda control. Congress offered neither a rubber stamp nor a brick wall. Ambitious lawmakers also attempted to shape the agenda, building coalitions of their own and forcing action. It was a more dynamic, multidimensional, fluid system in which more entrepreneurial politics were possible, and some unexpected cross-partisan compromises emerged.

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<sup>10</sup> Our argument about the advantages of PR also applies to state legislatures.

<sup>11</sup> Anibal Pérez-Liñán, Nicolás Schmidt, and Daniela Vairo, "Presidential Hegemony and Democratic Backsliding in Latin America, 1925–2016." *Democratization* 26, no. 4 (2019): 606–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1566321>.

It was under these conditions, in the 1970s and 1980s, that comparative political scientists looked to the U.S. as a model of presidential democracy. Certainly, much has changed in U.S. politics since then. Given the nationalization of U.S. politics and the shifting demographics, it is unlikely we could re-create those conditions. Nonetheless, such a system reflected a kind of balance of power that can emerge when coalitions are more fluid.

PR would have other advantages that could enhance system functionality and strengthen its democratic character.

First, it would greatly curtail or eliminate gerrymandering, which has become a toxic means by which politicians choose their voters rather than vice versa. With modern statistical methods of calculating electoral advantages, gerrymandering has become more surgical than ever.

If the U.S. adopted PR with states as the districts, it would be impossible to engage in gerrymandering. Even if populous states were divided into a few districts, the opportunities for gerrymandering would decline drastically. Gerrymandering relies on single-member districts.<sup>12</sup>

Gerrymandering invites political disaffection and reduces electoral accountability by creating

a large number of safe seats. Eliminating or greatly curtailing gerrymandering would ensure greater stability in the geographic composition of electoral districts, and it would therefore curb fraught judicial rulings about the legality of different efforts at gerrymandering, and at districts designed to promote minority representation.

Second, under PR, all votes—and hence, all voters—count more equally because they could be decisive in outcomes. In recent House elections, because

of the combination of geographical sorting; nationalization of elections; and gerrymandering, only about 10% of House seats have been competitive.<sup>13</sup> Low competitiveness in elections is not healthy for electoral accountability or for fostering electoral participation. Despite the increase in turnout in the last three House elections (2018-22), the

U.S. has long had one of the lowest turnout rates among democracies. Incumbents who face almost certain reelection avoid the disciplining effects of competition and can easily be captured by extreme selectorates. Proportional representation tends to increase turnout because more candidates and parties have incentives to mobilize voters, and voters are more likely to find a candidate they feel represents them well.<sup>14</sup> Particularly under

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<sup>12</sup> Ferran Martínez i Coma and Ignacio Lago, "Gerrymandering in Comparative Perspective," *Party Politics* 24, no. 2 (2018): 99–104, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816642806>.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Drutman, "What We Know About Redistricting and Redistricting Reform," *New America*, September 19, 2022, <http://newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-redistricting-and-redistricting-reform/>; "Single-Winner Districts and the Failures of Redistricting," *Fix Our House*, 2023, [https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/613563a06af623f7dbce91f8/640de2822e2b1643e130b035\\_FOH%20Redistricting%20Report.pdf](https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/613563a06af623f7dbce91f8/640de2822e2b1643e130b035_FOH%20Redistricting%20Report.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> João Cancela and Benny Geys, "Explaining Voter Turnout: A Meta-Analysis of National and Subnational Elections," *Electoral Studies* 42 (2016): 264–75. Geys, Benny, "Explaining Voter Turnout: A Review of Aggregate-Level Research," *Electoral Studies* 25, no. 4 (2006): 637–63.

an open list system, where voters can choose among candidates within their preferred party (guaranteeing that elections are competitive within parties as well as among parties), turnout is likely to increase.

Third, a PR system would probably help reduce affective polarization, which many scholars and journalists identify as the most dangerous feature of the contemporary U.S. political system.<sup>15</sup> In multiparty systems, shifting coalitions lead to voters feeling positive towards other parties in their coalition, creating an enduring “affective bonus” even after the coalition dissolves. This positive perception is attributed to a sense of shared fate and observed cooperation among

coalition parties, leading voters to view these parties as having similar values and priorities. In contrast, two-party highly polarized systems like the U.S. perpetuate a consistent us-versus-them dynamic.<sup>16</sup>

The potential to reduce polarization is a major virtue of PR—an argument that would surprise an earlier generation of scholars who identified high polarization with multipartism and two-party systems with moderation.<sup>17</sup> The contemporary U.S. combines high polarization with rigid bipolarity—a fraught combination.

As we noted above, as the system has evolved, relatively few congressional districts are electorally competitive today. With no electoral threat from the other party, many members of the House are primarily concerned with being responsive to their most engaged partisans and with thwarting the possibility of a primary challenge. Today, Republican districts are overwhelmingly exurban, or rural and conservative. Democratic districts are urban and suburban, and overwhelmingly liberal. Prior to the nationalization and sorting of the parties, many more moderate-to-liberal Republicans and moderate-to-conservative Democrats went to Congress. Today, they are nearly extinct.

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**Proportional representation tends to increase turnout because more candidates and parties have incentives to mobilize voters, and voters are more likely to find a candidate they feel represents them well.**

Whereas the current dynamic favors polarizing positions in most safe districts, in a PR system, a larger number of candidates could likely win with moderate campaign appeals. A pivotal bloc of moderates and the absence of single-party majorities would likely usually

put moderates at the center of congressional dynamics and cabinet formation. Though very liberal and very conservative politicians would have some representation under proportional representation, they would almost certainly have less leverage. Under the current polarized two-

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<sup>15</sup> Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svoblik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392–409, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>; Zack Beauchamp, “How Does This End?,” *Vox*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22814025/democracy-trump-january-6-capitol-riot-election-violence>.

<sup>16</sup> Will Horne, James Adams, and Noam Gidron, “The Way We Were: How Histories of Co-Governance Alleviate Partisan Hostility,” *Comparative Political Studies* (May 21, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221100197>; Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, “Who Dislikes Whom? Affective Polarization between Pairs of Parties in Western Democracies,” *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2023): 997–1015, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000394>.

<sup>17</sup> Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

party system, Republican and Democratic leaders alike have only one possible governing coalition: the governing coalition that includes only their party, which gives extremists significant leverage. In a proportional multiparty system, however, it would be difficult to form a governing coalition without the political center. Whether voters select a center-right or a center-left Congress, leaders would have more options to form coalitions that don't rely on the extremes. If presidents included the extremes in their coalitions, extremes would have less leverage given the wider range of possible coalitions.

Finally, PR would allow for a greater diversity of representation, with potential beneficial effects for democracy. For example, Black voters could more easily elect Black representatives in states with significant Black populations, without specially carved out districts that depend on the conservative Supreme Court upholding existing provisions in the Voting Rights Act. Election experts rate proportional systems as better for diverse representation than single-member districts, which tend to overrepresent the dominant groups in society.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Shaun Bowler, David M. Farrell, and Robin T. Pettitt, "Expert Opinion on Electoral Systems: So Which Electoral System Is 'Best'?", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 15, no. 1 (2005): 3–19.

# Presidentialism and PR is a common combination throughout the world

As proportional representation gains support as a possible remedy for hyperpartisan polarization, authoritarian risk, and inadequate representation, one commonly raised concern is whether proportional representation for the U.S. Congress could work with a presidential system, particularly the American presidential system. For many Americans, proportional representation is synonymous with a parliamentary system, because the multiparty proportional systems that commonly come to mind (most Western European cases, and Israel) are indeed parliamentary systems. But among stable democracies, it is just as common for proportional representation to pair with presidential systems, and just as common for majoritarian (first-past-the-post) elections to pair with parliamentary systems.

To show how common the PR and presidentialism combination is, we assembled data on the distribution of democracies in the world that are presidential, semi-presidential and parliamentary, and data on their electoral systems (majoritarian with single-member districts; proportional; or mixed). We used thin criteria to select the set of democracies: A country must meet the commonly used Regimes of the World dataset criteria for electoral democracy for each of the last 10 years (2013-22). The main criterion is a V-Dem electoral democracy score of at least 0.500. This threshold includes some marginal cases that most experts

would judge to be semidemocratic. We used the 10-year rule to exclude short-lived democracies and semidemocracies.

These criteria generate a set of 78 democracies and semidemocracies, shown below in Table 1. Of 24 presidential systems that have been stable democracies or semidemocracies for the last decade, 20 have had proportional representation or mixed systems (some seats are allocated by PR and others by majoritarian districts) for the lower chamber of the national assembly or, in cases of unicameral legislatures, for the sole chamber.

**Table 1: Distribution of Democracies by System of Government and Lower Chamber Electoral System**

	Majoritarian	Proportional	Mixed
Parliamentary	12	15	3
Presidential	4	14	5
Semipresidential	2	17	5
Hybrid	0	1	0

Unlike the situation in much of the 20th century, the combination of presidentialism and PR has become commonplace. Four of these cases—Costa Rica, Cyprus, Chile and Uruguay—have achieved

high levels of liberal democracy for an extended time. According to V-Dem, Costa Rica (0.82) in 2022 had a higher liberal democracy score than the U.S. (0.74), and Cyprus (0.77), Chile (0.76) and Uruguay (0.72) were very close to the U.S. score.

Conversely, the combination of presidentialism and a majoritarian electoral system for the lower

chamber is uncommon. Along with the U.S., only three other presidential semidemocracies have majoritarian systems for the lower chamber: Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The U.S. is the world's only robust democracy with this combination—no other advanced industrial democracy has it!

# How Presidentialism works with PR

An older literature claimed that the combination of presidentialism and a fragmented party system tends to be problematic for democracy.<sup>19</sup> This literature contended that with PR and multipartism, gridlock tended to result, often producing democratic breakdowns. However, since the early 1990s, scholarship on presidentialism, electoral systems, and democratic stability has challenged the earlier pessimism about the combination of presidentialism and PR. As scholars have expanded their cases, refined their data analyses and deepened their institutional understanding—and as far more democracies have used the combination of presidentialism and PR—a more nuanced understanding has emerged.

For well over a decade now, the growing conventional wisdom has been that presidentialism and PR can work well together. The newer literature has shown that coalitional presidentialism, in which the president's party shares power with others through cabinet appointments and other mechanisms, is a common and perfectly viable institutional combination.

Here are a few recent assessments:

- “Twenty years of research have shown presidentialism to be remarkably durable, and in particular its multipart variant has vastly overperformed relative to early predictions.”<sup>20</sup>
- “The Cassandra views with which we began are not only ungrounded but also largely false. Government coalitions are less frequent under presidentialism than under parliamentarism, but the difference is one of degree, not of kind. Highly fractionalized legislatures turn out to promote coalitions in both systems. Single-party minority governments are not less successful in the legislature than coalition governments, minority or majority. Legislative paralysis appears to be a rare phenomenon.”<sup>21</sup>
- “The ability of multipart presidentialism to subsist with sustainable democracy is beyond dispute ... multipart presidentialism has boosted political stability, and has not degenerated into systemic corruption as long as robust political competition and a set of strong autonomous institutions exist alongside it to keep its potential excesses within bounds.”<sup>22</sup>

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19 Scott Mainwaring, “Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy: The Difficult Combination,” *Comparative Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 198–228; Juan J. Linz, “The Perils of Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990): 51–69.

20 Paul Chaisty, Nic Cheeseman, and Timothy Power, “Rethinking the ‘Presidentialism Debate’: Conceptualizing Coalitional Politics in Cross-Regional Perspective,” *Democratization* 21, no. 1 (2014): 72–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.710604>.

21 José Antonio Cheibub, Adam Przeworski, and Sebastian M. Saiegh, “Government Coalitions and Legislative Success Under Presidentialism and Parliamentarism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 4 (2004): 579, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123404000195>.

22 Carlos Pereira and Marcus André Melo, “The Surprising Success of Multipart Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3 (2012): 156–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0041>.

- “The Linzian interpretation of presidentialism is probably too pessimistic. Presidents in Latin America are not always the inflexible and imperial leaders previously characterized by Linz.”<sup>23</sup>
- “We do not find dominant or deadlocked presidents; instead we observe differences in the extent to which presidents succeed in enacting their programs and, perhaps more interestingly, how this is achieved.”<sup>24</sup>
- Presidents with fewer formal, constitutional powers must bargain more with legislators, which might lead to more democratic stability.<sup>25</sup>
- A modest multiparty system without excessive fragmentation seems to work best. Some party diversity is helpful. Extreme party-system fragmentation is more problematic.<sup>26</sup>
- Binary political divisions and high levels of polarization are dangerous no matter what.
- Individual presidential character and talent matters.

Naturally, some multiparty presidential countries have performed better than others. Since presidential democracies vary considerably across institutional design questions and economic conditions, it is possible to offer some tentative conclusions:

23 Christian Arnold, David Doyle, and Nina Wiesehomeier, “Presidents, Policy Compromise, and Legislative Success,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017): 392, <https://doi.org/10.1086/688080>.

24 Eduardo Alemán and George Tsebelis, *Legislative Institutions and Lawmaking in Latin America* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 225.

25 This is Shugart and Carey’s (1992) argument. Figueiredo and Limongí (2000) make the opposite argument for the Brazilian case: In a context of very high party system fragmentation, strong constitutional powers—especially presidential decree powers—help presidents govern. Without strong constitutional powers, the president would face a daunting task. Matthew Soberg Shugart and John M. Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Argelina Cheibub Figueiredo and Fernando Limongí, “Presidential Power, Legislative Organization, and Party Behavior in Brazil,” *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 2 (2000): 151–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422395>.

26 Eduardo Mello and Matias Spektor, “Brazil: The Costs of Multiparty Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 113–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0031>.

# How presidents build governing majorities in multiparty systems

In multiparty systems, presidents have various ways to build majorities, but the most common and effective way is through multiparty cabinets. To help facilitate a governing coalition in the legislature, presidents typically allocate positions and portfolios in their cabinet, often in proportion to party strength.<sup>27</sup> Scholars refer to this as coalition presidentialism.

Often, presidents are able to maintain multiparty coalitions across the executive and legislative branches, which allows them to successfully pass preferred policy and govern. Not surprisingly, cabinets form more easily when coalitions are smaller and have more ideological overlap.<sup>28</sup>

Many coalition governments are preelectoral coalitions. That is, smaller parties that endorse another party's presidential candidate offer organizational infrastructure, civil society connections and access to campaign funds. In exchange, they get policy concessions and coalition appointments, including at the cabinet

level.<sup>29</sup> These preelection coalitions tend to be more stable, since they were formed strategically in advance of the election. Postelection coalitions often form as well, but they are more fragile. Sometimes presidents will lead a minority government, in which they constantly have to bargain with the legislature. In the United States,

we would call this divided government. It is quite common.

A minority government does not necessarily lead to immobilism. Instead, presidents bargain with opposing parties on an ad hoc basis.<sup>30</sup> In some

ways, this can be normatively desirable. A minority government that builds majority coalitions on an issue-by-issue basis is most likely to reflect majority sentiment on every issue. However, it can also lead to deadlock.

Presidents can also have success in building coalitions through old-fashioned pork-barrel politics: allocating money and budgetary authority to bring coalition partners on board through

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**In multiparty systems, presidents have various ways to build majorities, but the most common and effective way is through multiparty cabinets.**

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27 Octavio Amorim Neto, "The Presidential Calculus: Executive Policy Making and Cabinet Formation in the Americas," *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 4 (2006): 415–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414005282381>.

28 Johannes Freudenreich, "The Formation of Cabinet Coalitions in Presidential Systems," *Latin American Politics and Society* 58, no. 4 (2016): 83 ("Coalition cabinets are also more likely to form when coalition members are ideologically connected or when they minimize the number of parties and the ideological range within the cabinet."); Gabriel L. Negretto, "Minority Presidents and Democratic Performance in Latin America," *Latin American Politics and Society* 48, no. 3 (2006): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2006.tb00356.x>; Alemán and Tsebelis, *Legislative Institutions and Lawmaking in Latin America*. p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/laps.12003>.

29 Johannes Freudenreich "The Formation of Cabinet Coalitions in Presidential Systems," 2016

30 Paul Chaisty, Nic Cheeseaman, and Timothy Power, "Rethinking the 'Presidentialism Debate': Conceptualizing Coalitional Politics in Cross-Regional Perspective," *Democratization* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.710604>.

presidential discretion.

Plenty of coalition partners are available for a price.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, particularistic benefits can sometimes creep toward outright corruption. This is partly why an overly fragmented or weak party system can be problematic.

Still, the broad takeaway is that earlier concerns about immobilism and deadlock in multiparty presidential systems were overblown: “Whatever is wrong with presidentialism, is not due to the difficulty of forming coalitions.”<sup>32</sup> The real perils of presidentialism come with illiberal presidents, not with multipartism—and in this sense, the situation is similar to parliamentary democracies.

While presidents in proportional multiparty democracies have many tools to build coalitions beyond their own party, the situation in the United States is decidedly different. A president facing a Congress in which at least one chamber is controlled by the opposite party now faces significant deadlock and immobilism. With only two parties and constantly close elections, this is common. A president facing an opposed Congress is unlikely to win opposing-party support through cabinet appointments. Pork-barrel politics have grown much less effective. The binary nature of the U.S. party system in a context of high polarization gives presidents few options to build

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**The real perils of presidentialism come with illiberal presidents, not with multipartism—and in this sense, the situation is similar to parliamentary democracies.**

cross-party coalitions.

### **Do We Really Need Electoral Reform?**

Some scholars dispute our view that the U.S. system is broken and needs repair via the kinds of reform we propose in this paper.

In the most optimistic

telling, checks and balances held when President Donald Trump attempted to undermine the 2020 election results.<sup>33</sup> This analysis emphasized that institutions held against the populist threat. The Legislature<sup>34</sup>, and especially the courts, restrained some of the most illiberal tendencies of the Trump administration. However, even in this optimistic telling, Trump—and the illiberal policy and rhetoric—have not diminished despite this restraint. Elected Republicans in Congress have embraced Trumpism, and a new generation of Trump-appointed judges is less restrained. Moreover, attacks against democracy have succeeded at the state level. In another telling, Trump’s illiberal tendencies gained remarkable support within the Republican Party. And because the Republican Party is one of the two major parties in the U.S., reflexive partisan loyalty gave Trump power that emboldened him to attempt to weaken checks and balances, and to remain in office even after he lost the 2020 election.

And in a third telling, Trump’s initial popularity was a reflection on the gridlock and immobilism

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31 Arnold 2017 notes that “Recent comparative work ... has emphasized the importance of the transfer of particularistic benefits, together with cabinet and public sector goods, to individual legislators and coalition partners, in order to build and maintain support for the executive’s legislative agenda” (Ames 2001; Amorim Neto 2002; Cox and Morgenstern 2001; Raile et al. 2010). Pork can be exchanged in return for votes and can help “overcome ideological resistance in generating legislative support” (Raile et al. 2010, 324). In this way, the transfer of material resources can offset the need for the president to compromise her policy position, enabling her to remain closer to her preferred position in the policy space.” Arnold, Doyle, and Wiesehomeier, “Presidents, Policy Compromise, and Legislative Success,” 2017, 383.

32 José Antonio Cheibub, Adam Przeworski, and Sebastian M. Saiegh, “Government Coalitions and Legislative Success Under Presidentialism and Parliamentarism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 4 (2004): 565, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123404000195>.

33 Kurt Weyland, “Populism’s Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the United States,” 2020.

34 Frances Lee, “Populism, Democracy, and the Post-2020 Republican Party in Congress,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12817>.

within the U.S. political system, and the inability of presidents to pass their popular programs because of a parochial Congress.<sup>35</sup>

These different perspectives reflect the complicated and conflicting views towards checks and balances in the U.S. political imagination. But they all suggest a system that at best has become

dysfunctional and highly conflictual, and at worst is in crisis. We believe a PR system for the House of Representatives would generate moderate multipartism, which in turn would lead to stronger checks on the president than unified government presents, and more flexibility to form coalitions that could avoid gridlock when the president lacks a majority in Congress.

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<sup>35</sup> William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government—and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency*, first edition (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

# The Importance of Checks and Balances

How much power should presidents have? How often should they succeed in passing their preferred programs? If they are thwarted by the legislature or the courts, is this normatively good, or bad?

The concerns of governing efficiency must balance against concerns about presidents and majority parties abusing their power to punish political enemies and entrench their own power. Since the end of the Cold War, executive takeovers—by which presidents and prime ministers who were initially freely and fairly elected subsequently undermine democracy—have been the most common route to democratic breakdown.<sup>36</sup>

In theory, legitimate public policy should emerge out of the bargaining among multiple actors, within the boundaries of majority public opinion. In modern liberal democracy, minorities should not rule over majorities, as happens too often in our current system<sup>37</sup>, but fundamental minority rights—especially those of speech, dissent and organization—must be preserved.

Thus, we make a distinction between presidents gaining majority support for their programs through persuasion and bargaining, and presidents gaining majority support for their programs through intimidation and bribery. We also distinguish between presidents winning

elections legitimately and winning elections through manipulation of the rules. Sometimes, when presidents attempt to abuse their power, immobilism and gridlock are signs of a healthy democratic system, with adequate checks and balances.

One advantage of coalition presidentialism over our current system is that it generates institutionalized ways of building majorities (through a multiparty cabinet) but typically without the risk of presidential hegemony that can give illiberal presidents a free check to weaken democracy.

## The Devil Might Be in the Details

PR systems vary in several ways that together make a meaningful difference in how they function and how well they function. Among the two most important details: whether party elites or voters decide which specific candidates get elected first, and the district magnitude (the number of representatives elected per district).

With closed-list PR, party elites decide which specific candidates are elected first; they rank order the list of candidates. With open-list PR, voters choose specific candidates (though they may often vote for the party label as an alternative). Seats are first allocated according to the party's vote share, but within each party,

<sup>36</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point* (Penguin Random House, 2023).

the individuals with the most personal votes win election. Germany has a mixed system. Voters cast two ballots: one for the party and the other for a specific candidate. Each of these systems has advantages and disadvantages, but in the U.S. context, it would be alien to politicians and voters alike to have the party elite decide the order of the ticket. Politicians are not accustomed to being entirely beholden to the party elite for their election, and voters are used to having choices of specific candidates. Closed lists would almost certainly be a nonstarter for politicians and voters. Open-list PR would also have the advantage of greatly reducing the possibility of safe seats.

John Carey and Simon Hix contended that a district magnitude of four to eight maximizes benefits (e.g., diversity of representation) before venturing too far into risks (e.g., extreme fractionalization).<sup>38</sup> Our main thought about district magnitude is that it should not be capped at a low number (say, under five or six). Low district magnitudes make it more challenging for parties of modest electoral appeal to gain representation. They also create more opportunities for gerrymandering. One possibility could be making many states the electoral districts, as occurs in two of the other large federal democracies in the Western Hemisphere, Brazil and Argentina, and in Germany's party-list elections.

### **Is It Politically Feasible?**

Some electoral reforms that might be normatively desirable in the U.S. are politically impossible. Implementing a PR system for the House would be not easy, but it is much more politically feasible than some other reforms.

One reason PR might be a feasible reform is that at the national level, it would not obviously benefit one of the existing parties over the other. This is because at the national level, the parties usually win a percentage of House seats that is close to their two-party share of the vote. Reforms that would impose high costs on one party are politically difficult. Importantly, enacting proportional representation could be done by ordinary legislation; it does not require a constitutional amendment. Article 1, Section 4 (the elections clause), gives Congress authority to decide how its own elections should be run—a power it has used in the past to mandate single-member districts.

Perhaps more important, the individual-level incentives of members of Congress are not incompatible with voting for PR for the House. Members of Congress are increasingly frustrated with the hyperpartisanship of Congress; the endless trench warfare; and the power of party extremists in a polarized two-party system. Proportional representation could attenuate these. PR could also create a more natural, programmatically aligned home for Republicans eager to distance themselves from the MAGA group and for progressive Democrats who chafe at many positions of the party's moderates.

The vast majority of incumbent members would still get reelected, just under different voting rules. One advantage of proportional representation for members of Congress is that it takes away the danger of being redistricted or gerrymandered out of a job every decade.

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<sup>38</sup> John M. Carey and Simon Hix, "The Electoral Sweet Spot: Low-Magnitude Proportional Electoral Systems," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (2011): 383–397.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

In the 1990s, Juan Linz argued that presidentialism is inherently perilous, with a tendency to collapse under the inevitable immobilism and gridlock that would arise from the dual mandate—especially under a fragmented multiparty system. If presidentialism were to work, scholars believed, it would depend on a system with moderate parties, as the United States—the exemplar of stable presidential democracy—clearly demonstrated.

Over the last three decades, this consensus has shifted. The United States has gone into democratic decline as the increasingly ideological two-party system has divided the country, and hyperpartisan polarization has strained American institutions. Meanwhile, in many countries around the world, multiparty presidential democracy has proven much more resilient than the scholarly consensus of the early 1990s predicted.

The new scholarly consensus is that multiparty presidentialism is capable of working just fine. Presidents build coalitions in many ways, and they frequently succeed in passing their programs. As long as moderate parties are well represented in the legislature, presidents (except for those with strong illiberal tendencies) typically gravitate towards the policy middle, often showing remarkable flexibility in response to changing political winds—and sometimes to the frustration of their parties.

Certainly, detractors of the combination can pick examples that have gone sideways. But as we have shown, most presidential democracies have proportional multiparty lower chambers. Breakdown is the exception, not the norm.

How might a switch to PR for the House affect the U.S. Senate, which is distinct in both its formal powers and its inherently single-winner elections? It is likely that multipartism in the House would breed some multipartism in the Senate. We suspect that under a multiparty House, regional variations in party strength will translate into different parties solidifying different preelectoral Senate coalitions in different states. For example, in more conservative states, we would expect to see conservative parties unite around one candidate, and moderate parties unite with left parties around a second candidate. In more liberal states, we would expect the opposite. This kind of coalitional politics could be formalized through the use of fusion voting, in which multiple parties would offer independent ballot lines for the same candidate.

The usual exogenous variables obviously matter for how well the combination of presidentialism and multipartism works: weak states; low levels of development; economic crisis; corruption scandals; and particularly skilled or unskilled leaders. On balance, multiparty legislatures can work well with elected presidents. The two offices provide distinct forms of representation. Together, they often balance each other out.

Were Congress to be elected through proportional representation, and contained a few parties instead of just two, how would this affect presidential politics? Assuming the Electoral College remained the same and most states continued to allocate their Electoral College voters in a winner-take-all fashion, we expect presidential elections would remain dominated by two major parties, even if Congressional parties split into different versions of Democrats and Republicans. However, depending on the strength of different legislative parties, we might expect slightly different preelectoral coalitions to form from election to election. As with Senate elections, we could imagine a system of fusion voting for presidential elections, in which multiple parties have ballot lines, but may support the same candidate in order to formalize their preelectoral coalition—and quantify how much support they bring to the winning coalition.

We would thus expect to see cabinets that better reflect the ideological diversity of winning coalitions, with presidents reaching out to representatives of multiple parties to govern.

As party loyalties became more diverse and fluid, preelectoral coalitions would likely shift as well (as they do in multiparty presidential democracies). Under such conditions, more voters will be open to competing candidates. Persuasion would again become more important than mobilization, and competing candidates would have clearer reasons to move toward the political middle, and innovate in the coalitions and policies that could build new majorities.

In short, we would imagine a more dynamic system that more closely resembles the American political system of much of the 20th century—the

system comparative scholars once looked upon as a relative model.

Here is the bottom line: Though many institutional changes could help American democracy work better, the zero-sum fight for power that dominates U.S. politics now makes most changes difficult. The first order must be to find ways to realign U.S. politics in ways that engage and effectively represent the country's diversity, while also breaking the pernicious binary that contributes to us-versus-them politics. Proportional representation for the House is unique among proposed reforms in creating opportunities to realign the party system, and reshape our political imagination by drawing new types of and new dimensions for political contestation, while at the same time being politically feasible. In a scenario that is optimistic but also realistic, implementing PR for the House could facilitate other meritorious political reforms by creating new ways to build coalitions. It could attenuate the two-party hyperpolarization that is dangerously threatening to the continued stability of American democracy.

Whatever concerns about presidentialism exist, there is no evidence that a system makes presidentialism function better. If a two-party system works well with presidentialism, it is only when that two-party system produces nonideological, moderate parties. Whatever risks exist in combining presidentialism and multipartyism in the United States, they are far fewer than doing nothing and maintaining the divisive us-against-them status quo.

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# Basics of PR Systems

The world's democracies have a wide range of variation in PR systems, but all have multimember districts, ranging from two seats per district in Chile from 1989 until 2013, to 150 seats in the Netherlands, which has a single country-wide district. Seats are allocated in proportion to the vote share. For example, California has 52 seats in the House of Representatives. In 2022, the Democrats won 63.3% of the vote and 40 of 52 seats (76.9%), while the Republicans won 36.2% of the vote and the remaining 12 seats (23.1%). With a state-wide PR system, if the minor parties failed to win a seat (as seems likely), the Democrats would have won about 63.6% of the seats (their share of the two-party vote), or about 33 seats, with the Republicans capturing about 36.4% of the seats, or about 19 seats. Differences in the exact formula for allocating seats might shift the totals slightly (for example, perhaps to 34 seats for Democrats and 18 for Republicans).

Some PR systems have electoral thresholds a percentage of the vote that a party must attain in order to win any seats. For example, with some exceptions, Germany imposes a 5% threshold. If a party fails to win 5% of the national vote, it does not win any seats. This threshold inhibits high fragmentation of the party system, and for this reason, we believe that some threshold would be a good idea for the US.

The two main ways that parties allocate seats to specific candidates are open list PR and closed list PR. In open list PR, voters have the option to select a specific candidate, and the candidates with the most personal votes within each list are elected. In the above example of California, the 33 Democrats and 19 Republicans with the most personal votes would win election. In closed list PR, party elites determine the order of the candidates. Voters choose a party but not a specific candidate. In the example of California, the 33 Democrats and 19 Republicans ranked highest by the party would win seats. Closed list PR has the merit that it tends to foster party building more than open list PR, but it would be very foreign to the U.S. tradition of giving voters rather than party elites the chance to select their representative.

# Distribution of Electoral Democracies by System of Government and Electoral System for the Lower Chamber

SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT	ELECTORAL SYSTEM		
	MAJORITARIAN	PROPORTIONAL	MIXED
<b>Parliamentary</b>	Australia, Barbados, Bhutan, Botswana, Canada, Jamaica, Mauritius, Solomon Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, and Vanuatu	Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Israel, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden	Italy, Japan, and Lesotho
<b>Presidential</b>	Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and United States	Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Indonesia, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, and Uruguay	Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Seychelles, and South Korea
<b>Semi-presidential</b>	France, and Mongolia	Austria, Bulgaria, Cape Verde, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Moldova, Namibia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sao Tome and Principe, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Timor-Leste	Georgia, Lithuania, Niger, Senegal, and Taiwan
<b>Hybrid</b>		Switzerland	

Note: The table shows systems of government and electoral systems in 2022.

Source: Bormann and Golder (2022), and IPU Parline for missing data (at <https://data.ipu.org>, accessed May 2023). We recoded Germany and New Zealand as PR rather than mixed systems because seats are fundamentally allocated proportionally to votes.

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